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DOI:

[10.1353/reg.2014.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/reg.2014.0011)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):

Rosset, D., & Svarin, D. (2014). The Constraints of the Past and the Failure of Central Asian Regionalism, 1991–2004. *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, 3(2), 245-266.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/reg.2014.0011>

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The Constraints of the Past and the Failure of Central Asian Regionalism, 1991–2004

Damian Rosset and David Svarin

This article examines the failure of regional integration in post-Soviet Central Asia. It proposes a narrative of the rise and fall of Central Asian regionalism between 1991 and 2004 centered on the perceptions and expectations of the region's republics. The argument is that these states did not emerge from the USSR in an ideational vacuum, where their construction of self at the international level was to be defined from scratch. Rather, the Central Asian elites inherited pre-existing understandings of the role and place of their respective state in the new international system. At the regional level, an actual and a perceived set of power relations led to incompatible preferences and strategies, thus making it impossible to find common ground for Central Asian regionalism.

Introduction

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 propelled the five Central Asian Soviet republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, into independence. These five states did not exist in their current form prior to being constituent republics of the Soviet Union and as a consequence they had to find ways to integrate and position themselves within the international state system. At a meeting in Tashkent in January 1993, the presidents of the five republics¹ declared that they would from now on recognize themselves under the designation “Central Asia,”² as opposed to their Soviet label *Sredniaia Aziia i Kazakhstan* (literally, “Middle Asia and Kazakhstan”). This declaration carried enormous weight: “to those gathered it was a statement of unity, an explicit declaration that the five states now shared a common fate.”³ The statement could also be interpreted as a strategy to move away from the

¹ Tajikistan was represented by the chairman of the parliament.

² Martha Brill Olcott, “The Myth of ‘Tsentral’naia Aziia’,” *Orbis* 38, no. 4 (1994): 549.

³ *Ibid.*

Russian sphere of influence but—more importantly—it defined and presented to the world the region formed by these five states as a unitary entity with clear boundaries, insiders, and outsiders.

The mindset of the five Central Asian republics (CARs) was predominantly determined by their common Soviet past. Even though the Soviet Union did not exist anymore as of 1991, its economic, political, cultural, and social links were very much alive. As a result, it seemed logical that the five CARs would undertake efforts to build regional organizations and institutions that would regulate their interactions. Indeed, between 1991 and 2004 a number of regional organizations of different nature, both excluding and including outside actors, were founded, reformed, merged, and dismantled. After 2004, however, only regional organizations including at least one country external to Central Asia still existed.

In this article, we discuss the failure of Central Asian regionalism in the years following their independence and trace it back to the Soviet legacy. Notwithstanding the positive feelings and good intentions coming out of the Tashkent meeting in January 1993, the common Soviet past was actually an obstacle to regionalism in Central Asia.

When speaking of Central Asian regionalism we primarily refer to regional institutional integration among the five CARs.⁴ In this article, however, we exclude Turkmenistan from the discussion because the country followed a firmly isolationist path and “has set itself apart from the phenomenon of regionalism altogether.”⁵ Adopting a strategy of “permanent positive neutrality,” Turkmenistan did not become a member of any regional organization in Central Asia and in fact the entire post-Soviet space (after being a full member at first, since 2005 it has only been an associate member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)).

When the five CARs gained independent statehood, they became new actors in the international system and, as such, needed to define their respective place in this system. We argue that the states of post-Soviet Central Asia did not emerge from the USSR in an ideational vacuum, where their construction of self at the international level was to be defined from scratch. Rather, the Central Asian elites inherited pre-existing norms and beliefs regarding the role and place of their respective states in the new international system. The structure inherited from the Soviet Union provided the CARs with both an actual and a perceived set of power relations.

We aim to show that the Soviet experience provided the CARs with a framework of interpretation, as well as a set of preferences, regarding in-

⁴ In our analysis, we do not focus specifically on economic cooperation and trade links between the CARs. For this, the work of Libman and Vinokurov is particularly instructive. See Alexander Libman and Evgeny Vinokurov, “Is It Really Different? Patterns of Regionalization in Post-Soviet Central Asia,” *Post-Communist Economies* 23, no. 4 (2011): 469–92.

⁵ Annette Bohr, “Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Order,” *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 485.

ter-state hierarchy in the region and that these preferences—incompatible with one another—have hindered the development of regional integration. In order to do so, we need, first, to define what we mean by power relationships and hierarchy and, second, to introduce the framework for assessing the causality between preferences towards hierarchy and regionalism.

This article proceeds as follows: the next section lays out the theoretical framework; we apply Hurrell's four different categories of how hegemony may act as a powerful stimulus to regionalism and to the creation of regionalist institutions to the Central Asian case.⁶ Thereafter, following a look back at the Soviet period, we propose a narrative of the rise and fall of Central Asian regionalism between 1991 and 2004 centered on the perceptions and expectations of the CARs.⁷

The Hierarchy-Regionalism Nexus

According to the neorealist approach to international relations, "the parts of a hierarchic system are related to one another in ways that are determined both by their functional differentiation and by the extent of their capabilities."⁸ Since states are "functionally undifferentiated" units, the international system is anarchic.⁹ This paper takes another stance: it considers that when a state possesses the security and economic capabilities to constrain another state's behaviour, there is a situation of relational hierarchy (even if the surrounding system is anarchic). This understanding is tangential to the conception of hegemony. A relatively ill-defined concept,¹⁰ hegemony deals with domination of a group over another, and thus with de facto hierarchy.

For the purpose of this article, two definitions of hegemony are useful. First, hegemony is "the leadership of one state (the hegemon) over other states in the system."¹¹ Second, hegemony represents a situation where "one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations and is willing to do so."¹² A hegemon is thus a state with both the capabili-

⁶ Andrew Hurrell, "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective," in *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and the International Order*, ed. Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37–73.

⁷ The ambition of this article is thus not to analyse new primary data, but rather to present an original and convincing explanatory interpretation of historical events.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 97.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Miriam Prys, "Hegemony, Domination, Detachment: Differences in Regional Powerhood," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 482.

¹¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 116.

¹² Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), 44. It is no coincidence that we draw on the same definitions as

ties (in terms of economic and security power) and the will to dominate other states. The existence of a hegemon, and thus of hierarchy, does not imply strict determinism in the patterns of relationships between the hegemon and the states under its hegemony. Hierarchy can be partial and is evolutionary. Between extremes of "Westphalian sovereignty" and "Imperial dominion," "there are many intermediate forms, ... including spheres of influence and economic zones, in which the dominant state prohibits subordinates from allying or exchanging with other potential great powers, and protectorates and economic dependencies, where the dominant state regulates broad areas of security or economic policy, respectively."¹³ Moreover, hegemony, as de facto hierarchy, does not imply that the smaller states necessarily accept this hierarchy and subordinate to the hegemon. Therefore, this article deals with the way they perceive the hegemony or hegemonic ambitions of other states and, crucially, how they relate to it. Most importantly, the existence of more than one hegemon can provide smaller states with more or less desirable options in terms of hierarchy.

The study of regionalism has been concerned with the role of hierarchical relations as drivers of or hindrances to regional cooperation.¹⁴ This dual perspective on regional integration is also brought forward by Amitav Acharya in his observation that, although "power matters," "how regions resist and/or socialize powers is at least as important a part of the story as how powers create and manage regions."¹⁵ The role and impact of hegemony on the formation of regional orders is thus a key component. This article examines regionalism in Central Asia using Andrew Hurrell's categorization, according to which there are "at least four ways in which hegemony may act as a powerful stimulus to regionalism and to the creation of regionalist institutions."¹⁶

First, regionalism can emerge as "a response to the existence of an actual or potential hegemonic power."¹⁷ Acharya refers to such responses as strategies of "exclusion... whereby regional coalitions of weaker states or minor powers may cooperate to reduce the scope for intrusion by stronger powers in their

Ruth Deyermond in her article on "Matrioshka hegemony." Indeed, we define hegemony in line with her multi-level hegemony model, where hegemons in smaller groups of states coexist with hegemons of greater importance. See Ruth Deyermond, "Matrioshka Hegemony? Multi-Leveled Hegemonic Competition and Security in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 151–73.

¹³ David A. Lake, "Regional Hierarchy: Authority and Local International Order," *Review of International Studies* 35, no. S1 (2009): 39.

¹⁴ Prys, "Hegemony, Domination, Detachment."

¹⁵ Amitav Acharya, "The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 630.

¹⁶ Hurrell, "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective," 50.

¹⁷ Ibid.

region's affairs."¹⁸ Such endeavors follow the expectation that weaker states seek to balance the relative power of stronger states.

A second way hegemony can promote regionalism is as "an attempt to restrict the free exercise of hegemonic power."¹⁹ Such a "rule-constrained hegemonic order" can be preferable to the states that have to deal with the regionalism-hegemony dilemma. Indeed, they allow trading the acceptance of some of the hegemon's demands for the positive externalities of the cooperation with a hegemon. Because they are more acceptable to the hegemon, such efforts to "pursue socialization/binding strategies directed at both outside and regional powers" are also "relatively more successful" than attempts to exclude the hegemon.²⁰

Third, regionalism can develop as an endeavor of weaker states to accommodate the regional hegemon to benefit from the positive externalities it provides—"bandwagoning in the realist jargon."²¹ This type of behavior is similar to the second one—it is also a "rule-constrained hegemonic order"—but puts less emphasis on the constraining aspects of regionalism on the hegemon and more on the positive externalities that bandwagoning states obtain. According to the neorealist approach, such behavior is expected when power differentials are huge, particularly because states balance "threats" rather than "power."²²

Finally, regionalism can emerge under the hegemon's conduct.²³ Thomas Pedersen called this phenomenon "co-operative hegemony" and proposed to approach it from the perspective of the hegemon's prospects. In his theory "regional institutionalization is seen as typically the product of a grand strategy pursued by comparatively weak or declining big powers."²⁴ Institutionalized cooperation is unnecessary, if not counterproductive to very dominant hegemons, which can maximize their benefits in bilateral relationships. In a situation of declining hegemony, however, the hegemon might be pressed "towards the creation of common institutions to pursue its interests, to share burdens, to solve common problems, and to generate international support and legitimacy for its policies."²⁵

These four possible interactions of hegemony-regionalism relationships offer a framework to understand the alternatives faced by the Central Asian states. However, while the systemic nature of this approach offers an understanding of the various possible alternatives offered to the decision-makers,

¹⁸ Acharya, "Emerging Regional Architecture," 647.

¹⁹ Hurrell, "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective," 50.

²⁰ Acharya, "Emerging Regional Architecture," 648.

²¹ Hurrell, "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective," 51.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 52.

²⁴ Thomas Pedersen, "Cooperative Hegemony: Power, Ideas, and Institutions in Regional Integration," *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 4 (2002): 678.

²⁵ Hurrell, "Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective," 52.

one needs to focus on the state level to understand how and why they prefer a specific option rather than another. This article argues that Central Asian regionalism has failed because the CARs have developed incompatible preferences towards regional integration. It identifies how the CARs have perceived regionalism and traces the origins of these perceptions to the Soviet experience. Perceptions influence how decision-makers understand their environment. They shape the expectations towards and the understanding of other actors' behavior, as well as their own choice of action.²⁶ The following chapter engages in a chronological narrative of the failure of regionalism in Central Asia, looking specifically at the perception patterns within the region and the resulting expectations towards regionalism.

The Failure of Central Asian Regionalism

Three distinct periods, running from 1991 to 2004, are defined in order to facilitate the subsequent discussion. We start with a look back at the Soviet period. Then we examine the period 1991 to 1997, which starts with the troubled early years of independence and ends with the conclusion of the Tajik civil war in May 1997. The second period, ranging from 1997 to 2001, is the period of consolidation with regard to Central Asian regionalism. The final period, from 2001 to 2004, can be called the internationalization of Central Asia since the region was rediscovered by the outside world as a consequence of the events of 9/11 and the ensuing global "war on terror." The end point of this study is the moment when Russia becomes a member of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in October 2004, thus marking the end of the last purely Central Asian regional organization.²⁷

We argue that the CARs had incompatible expectations regarding regionalism: while Uzbekistan considered it worthy only if it were to assume a leading role, the remaining republics found regional cooperation under the domination of Tashkent unacceptable. This was fuelled by the perception that Uzbekistan was the natural hegemon in Central Asia and that the other states preferred to subordinate to Russia.²⁸

In the Central Asian context, hegemonic aspirations have been attributed to two states—Russia and Uzbekistan. Russia has been termed a "declining he-

²⁶ Mary Buckley and Sally N. Cummings, eds., *Kosovo: Perceptions of War and Its Aftermath* (London: Continuum, 2001), 3.

²⁷ An overview of all the mentioned regional organizations in Central Asia can be found in Table 1. The list includes organizations that are either composed solely by CARs or by CARs and Russia.

²⁸ Bohr, "Regionalism in Central Asia"; Roy Allison, "Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 2 (2008): 185–202.

gemon" with regard to the post-Soviet space generally,²⁹ and to Central Asia in particular.³⁰ The calamitous economic situation of the early 1990s drove Russia to focus on internal matters rather than searching external dominance. The issue of Russia's role in its neighborhood was controversial among the Russian elite,³¹ as well as outside Russia. In practice, Russia expressed no ambition to play the role of hegemon in Central Asia. However, the conflicts in Tajikistan and Georgia highlighted Russia's crucial role in the region as a guarantor of security,³² not least because, even in a situation of decline, it still enjoyed "locally formidable" capabilities.³³ Economically too, the Russian disengagement from Central Asia did not lead to a situation where the CARs could function without Russia. Therefore, when the Kremlin renewed its interest in the region in the mid-1990s,³⁴ it still had the economic, security, and cultural attributes to be considered a regional hegemon. As such, "Russia [dominated] its neighborhood and [regulated] potential conflict between itself and its subordinates and between other dyads in the region."³⁵

Uzbekistan's hegemony in Central Asia is "aspirational rather than realized,"³⁶ but has been widely noted as a constant issue in post-Soviet Central Asia.³⁷ The idea of Uzbekistan's leadership in the region had a long history. Tashkent had already been the capital of the Tsarist "General Governorate of Turkestan"³⁸ and when the Bolsheviks took power, they "did not make a secret of their plans for Uzbekistan as the dominant regional power."³⁹ Mikhail Kali-

²⁹ William C. Wohlforth, "Revisiting the Balance of Power in Central Eurasia," in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 214–38.

³⁰ Deyermund, "Matrioshka Hegemony?"

³¹ Mikhail Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance: Relations between Russia and Kazakhstan in the Post-Soviet Era, 1992–1997* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999).

³² Rajan Menon and Hendrik Spruyt, "Possibilities for Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Post-Soviet Central Asia," in *Post-Soviet Political Order: Conflict and State Building*, ed. Barnett R. Rubin and Jack Snyder (London: Routledge, 1998), 103.

³³ Wohlforth, "Revisiting the Balance of Power," 214.

³⁴ Lena Jonson, *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Deyermund, "Matrioshka hegemony?" 160.

³⁵ Lake, "Regional hierarchy," 55.

³⁶ Deyermund, "Matrioshka Hegemony?," 162.

³⁷ Anna Zelkina, "Islam and Security in the New States of Central Asia: How Genuine is the Islamic Threat?," *Religion, State, & Society* 27, nos. 3–4 (1999): 356–72; Eric A. Miller and Arkady Toritsyn, "Bringing the Leader Back In: Internal Threats and Alignment Theory in the Commonwealth of Independent States," *Security Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 325–63.

³⁸ Mohammad-Reza Djalili and Thierry Kellner, "Moyen-Orient, Caucase, et Asie centrale: Des concepts géopolitiques à construire et à reconstruire?," *Central Asian Survey* 19, no. 1 (2000): 125.

³⁹ Zelkina, "Islam and Security," 359.

nin, the nominal head of state of the USSR, declared in 1925 that “Uzbekistan must play a large role in Central Asia, a role, one might even say, of hegemony.... You [leaders of the Central Committee of Uzbekistan] must relate to them [the rest of Central Asia] as Moscow relates to you.”⁴⁰ The Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was the most important republic in the region, as well as the most independent from Moscow in its management.⁴¹

The central role of the Uzbek SSR in Central Asia was primarily felt in Tajikistan, which had been created as an Autonomous SSR within the Uzbek SSR in 1924 and only gained the status of Union republic in October 1929. Both before and after this date, the relationships between the two entities have been controversial, not least due to the main centers of Tajik culture, Bukhara and Samarkand, being left outside Tajikistan. There was and is a feeling in Tajikistan that Uzbekistan aims to deny the nationhood of Tajiks since the 1920s. Indeed, Uzbekistan, “maintained a ‘big brother’ attitude towards Tajikistan... and was encouraged [by Moscow] to do so.”⁴² The situation of the Tajik minority in Uzbekistan was also a contentious issue, particularly after the development of Uzbek nationalism in the 1960s, and Tashkent largely ignored the Tajiks’ demands for minority rights.⁴³

Kyrgyzstan shared with Tajikistan a Soviet experience marked by an extreme dependence on the center to ensure both economic stability and security. The intervention of the Soviet army in the inter-ethnic riots between Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents of the southern cities of Osh and Uzgen in 1990 served as a reminder of this reality. For that matter, Moscow was hardly conceived as a historical enemy in Kyrgyz historiography, but rather as a benevolent patron or even an ally.⁴⁴ This lack of historical antagonism towards Russia was similar in Kazakhstan. While Russia conquered the khanates of Khiva and Kokand, as well as the emirate of Bukhara manu militari, its presence in the Kazakh steppes initially resulted from the request for assistance by the Kazakh Lesser and Great Hordes against the Kalmyks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴⁵

The Kazakh SSR’s whole economic structure was integrated into the one of Russia—not only through the interdependence of industrial plants, but also

⁴⁰ Quoted in Donald S. Carlisle, “Geopolitics and Ethnic Problems of Uzbekistan and its Neighbours,” in *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, ed. Yaacov Ro’i (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 77.

⁴¹ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

⁴² Jonson, *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia*, 112.

⁴³ Neil Melvin, *Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism on the Silk Road* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 50.

⁴⁴ Robert Lowe, “Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic,” in *Central Asia: Aspects of Transition*, ed. Tom Everett-Heath (London: Routledge, 2003), 107.

⁴⁵ Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195–251.

for “energy grids and supply lines [that] traditionally ran north-south rather than east-west.”⁴⁶ The economies of both republics were developed in a “single economic complex.”⁴⁷ Moreover, Kazakhstan’s Soviet experience provided it with an uncomfortable ethnic balance: by 1989, ethnic Kazakhs represented 39.5% of the country’s population, while the “Russian-speakers” (Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Russified Germans) were a majority.

In the USSR, Kazakhstan was not considered a part of Central Asia, but a distinct entity: the region was referred to as “Middle Asia and Kazakhstan.”⁴⁸ The Bolsheviks used this terminology to replace the Tsarist Turkestan they considered a potentially dangerous potential tool for nationalist mobilization.⁴⁹ However, although Kazakhstan was not formally a part of Central Asia, these five republics were often treated as a whole on the basis of their ethnographic and cultural likeness, “a fact generally recognized by Soviet writers.”⁵⁰

This very brief discussion of the CARs’ historical experience during the Soviet period with reference to the prevailing hegemonic order serves as backdrop to the subsequent discussion of Central Asian regionalism in the post-Soviet era. The respective perception of the self and the hierarchical position of the other CARs in the Soviet Union had an impact on the willingness and political decisions with regard to regional initiatives and attempts at regional integration.

1991–97: The Troubled Years of Independence

The unprepared independence into which the CARs were “catapulted”⁵¹ forced them to define their regional policies. However, the isolationist path

⁴⁶ Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), 10.

⁴⁷ Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance*, 67.

⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that at times in Soviet history there have been plans to integrate the economies of the four Middle Asian SSRs. However, these plans materialized only for eighteen months with the existence of the “Central Asian Economic Region” between February 1963 and December 1964. See Ian Murray Matley, “Industrialization (1865–1964),” in *Central Asia: 130 Years of Russian Dominance, a Historical Overview*, ed. Edward Allworth, 3rd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 337.

⁴⁹ Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *Réforme et révolution chez les musulmans de l’Empire russe: Bukhara 1867–1924* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1966), 272.

⁵⁰ Geoffroy Wheeler, *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 1. For example, the the Muftiyya of Tashkent (head office of religious affairs) had competency over the five SSRs. See Roy, *The New Central Asia*, 1.

⁵¹ Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia’s Catapult to Independence,” *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 3 (1992): 108–30.

chosen by Turkmenistan as well as the Tajik civil war blocked the prospects for regional cooperation during this period.

In the context of Russian disengagement from the region in the first half of the 1990s, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan defined clear objectives regarding regionalism, while Kyrgyzstan played a limited role due to its weak situation. Uzbekistan "could afford to play the independence card much sooner and much more wildly" than Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, because it was "geopolitically removed from Russia and with a small Russian minority."⁵² In the regional context, Tashkent inherited both the material potential and the ideational motivations to become an "instinctive imperialist."⁵³ Uzbekistan's will to impose itself as the main regional power was primarily observable in its policies towards its smaller neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Tashkent pressured Bishkek by withholding its shipment of natural gas when Kyrgyzstan unilaterally left the ruble zone in 1993, conducting military and intelligence operations on Kyrgyz territory and declaring its responsibility towards the large Uzbek population of Southern Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁴ However, it is primarily the Tajik civil war that allowed it to claim the role of "policeman of Central Asia," recognized by both Russia⁵⁵ and the West.⁵⁶ The Tajik civil war pushed Uzbekistan to develop a military capacity much earlier and broader than its Central Asian neighbors.⁵⁷ Most importantly, it defined Tashkent's approach to hierarchy in the region. Indeed, while the Uzbekistani and Russian forces cooperated closely during the first year of the war, since mid-1993 Uzbekistan distanced itself from Emomali Rakhmonov, the Russia-supported governmental side's leader. Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov feared the increasing political isolation of the traditionally ruling Uzbek minority from northern Tajikistan and started supporting this "third force" against the government in the conflict. Accordingly, it turned into a "rival to Russia in Central Asia" trying to restrict the latter's hegemony in the region.⁵⁸

In this context, Uzbekistan signed a free-trade agreement with Kazakhstan that became the CAEC when Kyrgyzstan joined the two countries in April

⁵² Sally N. Cummings, "Happier Bedfellows? Russia and Central Asia under Putin," *Asian Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2001): 144.

⁵³ Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's New States: Independence, Foreign Policy, and Regional Security* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), 113.

⁵⁴ Annette Bohr, *Uzbekistan: Politics and Foreign Policy* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998), 50.

⁵⁵ Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 54.

⁵⁶ Mahiaddin Mesbahi, "Regional and Global Powers in Central Asia," in *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 224.

⁵⁷ Gregory Gleason, "Uzbekistan: The Politics of National Independence," in *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, ed. Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 591.

⁵⁸ Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia*, 54.

1994. The institutionalization of Central Asia was a statement of unity, a unity that Tashkent considered as both shielding against Russian domination and inevitably centered on itself. As Annette Bohr puts it, “most initiatives for Central Asian integration [in the 1990s] have come from the Uzbekistani leadership, and have been accompanied by the underlying message that the region should unify around the Tashkent metropolis.”⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Tashkent’s policy towards Eurasian regional structures, mainly the CIS but also the Eurasian Union (EAO) project led by the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev,⁶⁰ aimed at preventing them from becoming instruments of Russian hegemonic reassertion.

Concomitantly, Nazarbayev, “the most enthusiastic defender of a revitalization of the USSR,”⁶¹ was advocating economic integration in the disintegrating post-Soviet space. He promoted a strong CIS that would reintegrate the post-Soviet space. At a meeting in Minsk in April 1994, he went as far as proposing a project for not only economic, but also political integration in the framework of the EAO.⁶² Nazarbayev believed integration with Russia would not only ensure the endurance of economic and security ties on which it depended, but would also constrain Russian hegemonic aspirations “by entangling it in the coils of consensual, multilateral decision-making.”⁶³ He made the opposite calculation to Karimov who saw such institutions as a smoke-screen for Russian reassertion.⁶⁴

While advocating for the EAO, Kazakhstan also promoted Central Asian regionalism. Still within the Soviet Union, Nazarbayev invited the leaders of the four Central Asian SSRs to Alma Ata to discuss common issues on 23 June 1990, “less than a fortnight after [Russia] declared its sovereignty.”⁶⁵ The following year, the five leaders met in Tashkent, and then in Ashgabat, to coordinate their reaction to the decisions taken in Minsk by the three Slavic republics.⁶⁶ Arguably, this advocacy for Central Asian cooperation was coherent with the main concept of Kazakhstani foreign policy, namely “multi-vector politics,” where the country is open to cooperation with any other country,

⁵⁹ Bohr, *Uzbekistan*, 51.

⁶⁰ Not to be confused with the Eurasian Union project proposed and outlined by Russian President Vladimir Putin in a newspaper article in 2011 and implemented in a first step as the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014.

⁶¹ Olcott, *Central Asia's New States*, 10.

⁶² Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance*, 168.

⁶³ Menon and Spruyt, “Possibilities for Conflict and Conflict Resolution,” 112.

⁶⁴ Bohr, *Uzbekistan*, 43–44.

⁶⁵ Alexandrov, *Uneasy Alliance*, 32.

⁶⁶ Romain Yakemtchouk, *Ouzbékistan: Puissance émergente en Asie centrale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), 100–1.

choosing on every matter the partner that maximizes its self-interest.⁶⁷ It represented both a response to Russian dealings with Belarus and Ukraine, which were leaving Kazakhstan aside, and a primary occurrence of “external” cooperation without the supervision of Russia.⁶⁸

1997–2001: The Consolidation Period

After the troubled post-independence years, the second half of the 1990s was characterized by the establishment of a number of regional organizations (see Table 1 on p. 260). In addition, some important developments changed the dynamics in Central Asia: in May 1997 the Civil War in Tajikistan came to an end; Russia’s interest and involvement in Central Asia grew bigger; and there was a surge in Kazakhstan’s power, thus limiting Uzbekistan’s hegemonic position.

During the later years of the 1990s, Uzbekistan adopted a double strategy in Central Asia. On the one hand it tried to constrain Russia’s influence in the region and, on the other hand, it positioned itself as the regional hegemon. In a 1995 speech in the Uzbekistani parliament, Karimov called for a movement “Turkestan our common home” and asked “How long are we going to keep silent, to be afraid of someone... of a Big Brother, how long?”⁶⁹ Uzbekistan also started to criticize the CIS of which it was a full, albeit somewhat passive, member for being a vehicle of Russian interest. In 1999, Karimov accused Russia of “trying to impose its will on CIS countries” and stated that all matters were “dictated by Russia.”⁷⁰ Tashkent opted out from the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty (CST) when the Treaty was to be renewed in early 1999 and joined the GUAM (acronym for Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), an alliance of CIS countries willing to limit Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space.⁷¹ With regard to Central Asia, Uzbekistan, while being challenged by Kazakhstan, tried to hang on to its position as regional hegemon by demonstrating force: “Since 1999 Uzbekistan has enforced a rigorous visa regime, mined its border regions, expelled residents from border areas, unilaterally demarcated certain border territories and regularly cut off energy supplies to its neighbors.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Reuel R. Hanks, “‘Multi-Vector Politics’ and Kazakhstan’s Emerging Role as a Geo-Strategic Player in Central Asia,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11, no. 3 (2009): 259–61.

⁶⁸ Zharmukhamed Zardykhan, “Kazakhstan and Central Asia: Regional Perspectives,” *Central Asian Survey* 21, no. 2 (2002): 168.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Anthony Hyman, “Turkestan and Pan-Turkism Revisited,” *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 3 (1997): 349.

⁷⁰ Miller and Toritsyn, “Bringing the Leader Back In,” 355.

⁷¹ Bohr, “Regionalism in Central Asia,” 488.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 495.

In reaction to Uzbek attempts at regional domination, the strategy of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan was to contain Uzbekistan by moving closer to Russia and by becoming members of all regional organizations that included Russia. In 1996, Kazakhstan joined the Customs Union between Russia and Belarus. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan remained a close ally to Russia in regional structures, agreeing to all Russian propositions in the CIS and joining both the "Shanghai Five" (comprising Russia, China, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan) and the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan in 1996.⁷³ Tajikistan remained mainly a passive member in regional institutions until it emerged from its civil war in 1997, but from then on President Rakhmonov has been an enthusiastic regionalist. He attempted "to carve out a niche" for himself "as an active promoter of security cooperation within the Russian-led CST,"⁷⁴ hoping to raise his prestige in Moscow. Furthermore, Uzbekistan's role in the Tajik civil war increased Tajikistan's suspicion towards its large neighbor and prompted Dushanbe to align even closer with the Russian hegemon. In 1998, Tajikistan joined the Customs Unions of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, which in October 2000 was renamed the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc).

Interestingly, Uzbekistan changed strategy towards the end of the 1990s from trying to limit Russian influence to benefiting from it. There are several reasons for Tashkent's foreign policy realignment in 1999. First, the change of leadership in the Kremlin indicated a renewed Russian policy towards Central Asia and Uzbekistan.⁷⁵ Second, the seemingly rising terrorist threat pushed the Uzbek leadership to seek additional security guarantees.⁷⁶ Third, a lack of hard currencies forced Uzbekistan to reorientate its foreign trade towards the CIS.⁷⁷ In this context, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five in June 2001 prompting the organization to rename itself Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This structure satisfied Tashkent because Chinese membership was effectively "neutralizing" the influence of Russia.⁷⁸ At the beginning of the 21st century, only one exclusively Central Asian regional institution, CACO, remained.

⁷³ Sébastien Peyrouse, Anne-Gabrielle Castagnet, Arnaud Ruffier, Olivier Roy, and Catherine Poujol, *République kirghize: Bilans annuels de 1993 à 2010* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

⁷⁴ Jonson, *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia*, 52.

⁷⁵ Cummings, "Happier Bedfellows?"; Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia*.

⁷⁶ Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia*.

⁷⁷ Robert Legvold, "Introduction: Great Power Stakes in Central Asia," in *Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian Nexus*, ed. Robert Legvold (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 20–21.

⁷⁸ Allison, "Virtual Regionalism," 195.

2001–4: The Internationalization of Central Asia

The third period starts with 9/11 and the increased international interest and active engagement of the United States (US) in the countries of Central Asia, especially in the context of the “war on terror.” One could not categorize the US as a regional hegemon, but due to its nature as global hegemon and in accordance with the “Matrioshka hegemony” model,⁷⁹ it enters the framework of hegemonic competition by changing the dynamics in the region. Hence, US activism in Central Asia and its alliance with Uzbekistan triggered fears among the other CARs about Uzbek hegemony⁸⁰ because US cooperation with Uzbekistan effectively embraced the latter as the regional hegemon.⁸¹

Whereas the previous years were characterized by varying approaches to regionalism, the early 2000s witnessed a much more homogenous approach by the CARs. At first, the US appeared to be a generous partner in terms of financial assistance, especially for Uzbekistan, and Tashkent believed the US could also replace Moscow as a security partner. In October 2002, Uzbekistan refused to join the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which replaced the CST. Kazakhstan also joined the US-led alliance in the “war on terror,” primarily as a means to raise its status vis-à-vis Russia and more broadly on the international scene, especially since it was increasingly considered to be dispossessing Tashkent from its regional leadership. The optimistic mood in the aftermath of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan prompted Tajikistan to diversify its external contacts and diminish its dependency on Russia and Uzbekistan. Dushanbe saw new opportunities to open up the country’s infrastructure by building new bridges to Afghanistan, but also new roads to Kyrgyzstan and China.⁸² Similarly, Kyrgyzstan cooperated with the US-led operation in Afghanistan, accepting to lease the Manas military base to the US.

In the end, however, US hegemony in Central Asia remained short-lived. Kyrgyzstan’s motive for assuring basing rights to the US was actually its desperate need for financial assistance rather than an attempt to move away from Russia. On the contrary, Bishkek offered Russia the use of the Kant airbase, only 35 kilometres away from Manas, in October 2003.⁸³ Furthermore, the very close Uzbek-US relationship cooled down quickly due to diverging views on political processes in the region. The 2003–4 “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine raised concerns among Central Asian elites, and particularly in Uzbekistan where American NGOs and politicians were increasingly critical

⁷⁹ Deyermont, “Matrioshka Hegemony?”

⁸⁰ Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Keeping Central Asia Stable,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2004): 702–3.

⁸¹ Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, “New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 61–62.

⁸² Sébastien Peyrouse, Anne-Gabrielle Castagnet, Arnaud Ruffier, and Olivier Roy, *République du Tajikistan: Bilans annuels de 1993 à 2010* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

⁸³ Bohr, “Regionalism in Central Asia,” 491.

of Tashkent's human rights record.⁸⁴ Russia was also irritated by US policies in the region and started signaling its readiness to enter in less intrusive security relations with Uzbekistan.⁸⁵ The cooling relations with the US, culminating in the harsh criticism by the US of the Uzbekistani security forces' management of the Andijan crisis in 2005,⁸⁶ accompanied by warming relations with Russia led to concrete outcomes in regional cooperation: Russia became a member of CACO in May 2004 and in May 2005 Uzbekistan withdrew de jure from GUUAM, from which it was de facto absent since 2002.⁸⁷

Not every country in Central Asia reacted with the same enthusiasm to greater Russian influence. While Karimov endorsed Russian involvement with the words "We regard Russia not simply as a donor on realizing economic projects, but also as a guarantor in solving those conflict situations which may arise between us. Russia always, at all times had been a power which settled many problems,"⁸⁸ Nazarbayev reacted to the abolishment of the last regional structure excluding Russia with a new proposition, namely the "Central Asian Union" (CAU). Addressing "the People of Kazakhstan" in February 2005, he declared: "In the region, we share economic interests, cultural heritage, language, religion, and environmental challenges, face common external threats.... We should direct our efforts towards closer economic integration, a common market, and a single currency."⁸⁹ Notwithstanding Kazakhstan's efforts at building stable regional structures, the opposite actually happened; in September 2005, CACO merged with EurAsEC and in October 2005 Uzbekistan became a member. Although this was a logical step after Russia's entry into CACO,⁹⁰ it also allowed Russia to claim that it had "effectively taken control over the integration processes in the region."⁹¹ By the mid-2000s, there no longer was a purely Central Asian regional organization and relations between

⁸⁴ David Lewis, *The Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia* (London: Hurst, 2008), 42–46.

⁸⁵ Alexander Cooley and Hendrik Spruyt, *Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 38.

⁸⁶ Lewis, *The Temptations of Tyranny*, 216.

⁸⁷ Richard Pomfret, "Regional Integration in Central Asia," *Economic Change and Restructuring* 42, no. 1–2 (2009): 61, fn. 21.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Marat Yermukanov, "Will Russia Help Diffuse Kazakh-Uzbek Tension?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 5, no. 20 (2004): 14–16.

⁸⁹ Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev, "Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the People of Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan on the Road to Accelerated Economic, Social, and Political Modernization," 18 February 2005, Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, available at http://www.akorda.kz/en/page/page_address-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-kazakhstan-nursultan-nazarbayev-to-the-people-of-kazakhstan-february-18-2005_1343986671, accessed on 16 May 2014.

⁹⁰ Pomfret, "Regional Integration in Central Asia," 54.

⁹¹ Murat Laumulin, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as 'Geopolitical Bluff?' A View from Astana," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 12 (2006): 173.

the CARs took place bilaterally or seemed to be regulated under the eyes of Russia. Or, as Farkhad Tolipov put it in 2005, “as a quasi-political structure and an institutionalized region, Central Asia no longer exists.”⁹²

Table 1. Selected Regional Organizations in Central Asia

<i>Name</i>	<i>Foundation</i>	<i>Members</i>
Commonwealth of Independent States	1991	Former Soviet Republics (except Baltic States from 1993 onwards)
Central Asian Economic Union (CAEU)	1994	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan (since 1998)
Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, formerly Collective Security Treaty)	1992; 2002	Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (left 1999, rejoined in 2006)
Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO, formerly CAEU)	1994; 2002	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia (since 2004)
Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc)	1994	Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (since 1996), Tajikistan (since 1999), Uzbekistan (since 2006)
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (formerly Shanghai Five)	1996; 2001	Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (since 2001)
Georgia, Ukraine, (Uzbekistan) Azerbaijan, Moldova (GUAM, later GUUAM)	1997; 1999	Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan (from 1999 to 2005), Azerbaijan, Moldova

Source: Kathleen Collins, “Economic and Security Regionalism among Patrimonial Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Central Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 2 (2009): 265–66.

Explaining the Failure of Central Asian Regionalism

The narrative in the previous section has demonstrated that in the years following their independence, the CARs adopted a variety of strategies in constraining, bandwagoning, and benefiting from the regional hegemons. There is a great fluctuation in their respective perceptions and the hierarchical position of each country in Central Asia with regard to the regional hegemon and the other CARs. Kazakhstan’s ambiguity towards both Russia and the other CARs, Kyrgyzstan’s deferent relation to Russia, Tajikistan’s fear of Uzbek domination as well as Uzbekistan’s self-perception as a regional power can

⁹² Farkhad Tolipov, “CACO Merges with EEC: The Third Strike on Central Asia’s Independence,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 6, no. 20 (2005): 9.

all be traced back at least to the history of national delimitations in the 1920s and the Soviet experience more generally. These representations provided the leaders of Central Asia with an image of their relative role in the region and, as a result, with a set of preferences and expectations regarding hierarchy. The diverse structural situations of the four republics under scrutiny since independence understood through the prism of their preferences on regional hierarchy provide an understanding of their perspectives towards regionalism. In turn, the incompatibility of these different perception patterns and the concomitant irreconcilable strategies explain the outcomes of regionalism in Central Asia.

The CARs' perceptions of and expectations towards Eurasian regionalism (including Russia) and purely Central Asian regionalism, reveal the diverging mechanisms at work. Each of the CARs, at different times, adopted different approaches to regionalism with relation to Hurrell's four categories: as a means to balance the hegemon; as a tool to contain its hegemonic aspirations; as a way to bandwagon with the hegemon; or as a result of and a tool for sustained hegemonic domination.

Kazakhstan was the strongest promoter of Central Asian regionalism, but at the same time a strong promoter of Eurasian regionalism. These two settings played different roles in Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Eurasian regionalism aimed primarily at socialising Russia. While Kazakhstan's approach towards Russian hegemony was less confrontational than Uzbekistan's, Nazarbayev was nonetheless willing to restrict Russian influence in Central Asia to some extent. Between 1991 and 2004, Kazakhstan shifted between Hurrell's categories 2 and 3, from joining all Russian-led initiatives such as the Customs Union and EurAsEc to diversifying its alliances by supporting the United States in the "war against terror."

Kazakhstan's approach to Central Asian regionalism can be categorized as balancing against Russia, thus representing category 1. Central Asian regionalism was viewed as a strategy to boost its symbolic position vis-à-vis Moscow. However, it can also be claimed that Kazakhstan promoted Central Asian regionalism since the turn of the century for another reason. Thanks to its increasingly dominant position in Central Asia, resulting from its enhanced material capabilities, Astana can claim to replace Uzbekistan as the regional hegemon. In this situation, its promotion of Central Asian regionalism corresponds to the fourth of Hurrell's categories. Interestingly then, Central Asian regionalism aims both at dominating the region and balancing against an external hegemon. This constellation, in which a country's strategy corresponds to Hurrell's categories 1 and 4, is possible only in a situation of multi-level hegemony.

Precisely this pattern can also be observed with Uzbekistan's approach to Central Asian regionalism up until the moment when Tashkent no longer is in a position to assume regional leadership. During this period, Uzbekistan demonstrated force with a number of policies aimed at increasing its position in the region. It also aimed at aligning the fellow CARs behind it, in order to

constrain Russian hegemony in Central Asia. However, contrarily to Nazarbayev, who advocated for Central Asian regionalism even before he was in a position to dominate it, Karimov lost interest in regional integration when he could no longer lead it. In other words, balancing Russia was more important to Kazakhstan than dominating Central Asia, while regional domination was more important to Uzbekistan than balancing the outer hegemon. This reveals the diverging perception patterns of the CARs: while Uzbekistan considered itself a natural regional hegemon, Kazakhstan evaluated its position in the region with regard to Russia—captured between a sense of vulnerability and the ambition to elevate its status in relation to Russia.

As far as Eurasian regionalism is concerned, Tashkent can be located in the second category during most of the period under study. Indeed, it always tried to limit the influence of regional organizations that included Russia, as well as Russia's influence within these organizations. Hence, Tashkent joined some of these organizations hoping to socialize Russia. For example, it opted out from the CST and later refused to join the CSTO as it considered the organization's structure to be giving too much power to Russia. Instead, it joined GUAM, another organization whose goal was to balance Russia. This policy rarely changed. However, in the late 1990s and following the first "color revolution" in Georgia, Russia's dominance appeared less problematic and Tashkent aligned more closely with Moscow, falling at times into category 3. This last rapprochement eventually resulted in the death of Central Asian regionalism, as it led Russia to join CACO in 2004.

Regional integration looked rather different from the viewpoint of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan due to their relative weak material capabilities and strong external dependency. Both countries joined most of the regional organizations at the Central Asian and Eurasian levels. Both sought the benefits from bandwagoning with Russia in Eurasian regional structures. They needed the security assistance and economic ties provided by the hegemon to maintain their statehood. Arguably, the fear of Uzbekistan gave an even bigger incentive to such behavior, particularly in the case of Tajikistan. They viewed close cooperation with Russia as an indispensable factor for their survival and as an instrument to contain Uzbekistani aspirations. In terms of Eurasian regionalism, both countries therefore fall in the third of Hurrell's categories as they clearly bandwagoned with Russia.

The vulnerability of both states to Uzbekistani economic and military power led the two countries to participate in Central Asian regional organizations. They saw these structures as opportunities to socialize and bind Tashkent, or at least to dilute its supremacy in bilateral relations. This strategy thus corresponds to category 2. However, the experience of fruitless Central Asian institutions seems to have hampered their confidence in those institutions' effectiveness to achieve that goal.

The Post-2004 Period

Obviously, history does not end in 2004 and the relationships between the CARs, as well as with Russia, have been fluctuating since then and will continue to do so. While actively participating in all Eurasian regional organizations, Nursultan Nazarbayev has promoted, at the Central Asian level, the project of an EU-modelled Central Asian Union. However, due mainly to Uzbekistan's rejection of this project, no concrete steps have been reached towards its realization. At the Eurasian level, the past decade has mainly witnessed the institutionalization of the CSTO and the SCO, as well as the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 under Russian leadership. Kazakhstan already signed the treaty, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are reported to have an interest in joining. This organization, aimed at creating a single economic market, is the brainchild of Russian President Vladimir Putin and thus considered to be primarily a means for Russia to institutionally embed its dominance in the post-Soviet region.⁹³

As mentioned earlier, the year 2004 was a turning point in the relationship between Tashkent and Moscow, bringing them closer together, thus impacting on Uzbekistan's approach to regionalism. The Andijan events in 2005 and the stir they created helped accelerate this process, which culminated in June 2006 when Uzbekistan joined the CSTO. However, this honeymoon did not last long as Tashkent feared Russia's preponderant position in the region. Uzbekistan suspended its membership in EurAsEC in October 2008 arguing that it was ineffective in solving the disagreement over water management in the region. It had, anyway, refused to implement the organization's treaties on border control and economic integration. Tashkent also left the CSTO in June 2012 after having missed several of the organization's meetings since 2009. Already before, Uzbekistan was a rather reluctant member in the organization, objecting to the establishment of a joint CSTO force in 2008 and a Collective Rapid Reaction Force in 2009.

Interestingly, the two states most vulnerable to Uzbekistan's hegemonic aspiration, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, have used the very platform of the CSTO to put forward a railway project that would circumvent Uzbekistan. As Joshua Kucera comments: "it would be an interesting development if the organization turned into a forum for the smaller Central Asian governments to band together against Uzbekistan's heavyhand regional influence."⁹⁴ Kyrgyzstan chaired the CSTO in 2013 and it seems that the 2010 regime change did not affect its policy in favor of regional integration at both the Eurasian and Central Asian levels. This is particularly noteworthy since regional organizations have been

⁹³ See, for example, Hannes Adomeit, "Putin's 'Eurasian Union': Russia's Integration Project and Policies on Post-Soviet Space," *Neighbourhood Policy Paper*, no. 4 (2012).

⁹⁴ Joshua Kucera, "At CSTO Summit, Varying Views On Regional Security," *Eurasianet*, 29 May 2013, available at www.eurasianet.org/print/67036, accessed on 7 June 2013.

reluctant to take sides during the April 2010 overthrow of Bakiev or to respond to the transition government's calls for assistance during the ethnic riots in southern Kyrgyzstan in June of the same year.⁹⁵

Tashkent's reluctance to Nazarbayev's project of the CAU can also be interpreted according to our model, since the growing gap between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, to the benefit of the former, renders Tashkent skeptical of a renewed Central Asian regionalism. Considering this disparity, such an endeavor would necessarily displace the regional leadership from Tashkent to Astana.⁹⁶ Uzbekistan's recent policy of increasing isolation reflects the same considerations as the policy of regional domination in the 1990s and the policy of reliance on the West in the first years of the new century: Tashkent is only interested in Central Asian regionalism under its own domination and refuses it when another actor becomes more powerful.

In the post-2004 period, the only regional organizations with a real prospect at fostering cooperation among the CARs have been organizations involving at least one country or institution external to the region. This provokes the question whether the idea of Central Asia as a region is still relevant and whether regional integration in Central Asia is not at a dead end. It seems that Central Asian integration today merely functions as part of a wider Eurasian integration.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The attitudes of the CARs towards Eurasian and Central Asian regionalism seem to have been strongly influenced by the respective images of self shaped by the emergence to statehood and reinforced during the years following the break-up of the Soviet Union. These perceptions provided the leaders with a representation of each state's place in the region and a set of preferences regarding regional hierarchy. The incompatibility of these perspectives led to diverging strategies regarding Central Asian regionalism.

While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan looked for the positive economic and security-related externalities resulting from regionalism with the Russian hegemon, Kazakhstan primarily aimed to dilute the power of that hegemon in regional structures. Nevertheless, from the Kazakhstani perspective, a real break-up with Russia was unthinkable and, hence, Kazakhstan's promotion of

⁹⁵ Alexander Cooley, "The Kyrgyz Crisis and the Political Logic of Central Asia's Weak Regional Security Organizations," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 140 (2011).

⁹⁶ Allison, "Virtual Regionalism," 192.

⁹⁷ Libman and Vinokurov, "Is It Really Different?," 486; see also Johannes F. Linn, "Central Asian Regional Integration and Cooperation: Reality or Mirage?," in *Eurasian Integration Yearbook 2012*, ed. Evgeny Vinokurov (Almaty: Eurasian Development Bank, 2012), 96–117.

Central Asian regionalism must be understood as a means to balance Russia. In addition, from Astana's viewpoint, Central Asian regionalism increasingly appeared like an important platform from which it could raise its status on the international scene as the leader of a region. Furthermore, it is true that Kazakhstan, to some extent, but particularly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, viewed close cooperation with Russia as an indispensable factor for their survival and an instrument to contain Uzbekistani aspirations. From Tashkent's viewpoint, a Central Asian regionalism was only desirable if it aimed to withstand Russia and allowed itself to exert regional hegemony.

Consequently, it seems fair to say that, because Central Asian regionalism under Uzbek hegemony was unacceptable to the remaining three republics, Uzbekistan's challenge to Russian hegemony and its own hegemonic aspirations have been significant hindrances to more effective regionalism in Central Asia. Furthermore, again we are able to observe how the socialization of each of the CARs during the Soviet period influenced its policy choices following independence. As such, Uzbekistan, which politically was at the center of Soviet Central Asia, tried to retain this position, while Kazakhstan was eager to build new regional structures to better integrate the region. Hence, the perception pattern in each of the CARs—reflecting their respective Soviet experience—led them to choose different approaches and diverging strategies with respect to regional cooperation and the hierarchy-regionalism nexus in Central Asia.

In general, the importance of the political elites in shaping Central Asian regionalism should not be neglected. Indeed, the political regimes of the CARs had and still have a very tight grip on political developments and prevent almost any kind of social organization. This can be seen as an additional factor inhibiting stronger regional links in the region: "The personalist regimes of Central Asia have impeded the emergence of the more diversified type of regionalization that would be created by interactions between NGOs, private traders, migrant labor, and other types of independent social and business networks. This so-called "soft" regionalism relies on the existence of a diversity of independent civil society organizations and transnational substate networks which have not been allowed to flourish in Central Asia."⁹⁸ As a result, transnational networks are relatively weak and the few non-state transnational movements are kept outside of the decision-making process. Since independence, the state has remained the uncontested political actor in Central Asia and thus a state-centric approach in analyzing regionalism in Central Asia seems adequate.

In fact, the political elites are one of the most enduring legacies of the Soviet system. There is continuity in political life across Central Asia today, as relatively little change has occurred since 1991. Furthermore, "Regime preservation has encouraged the pursuit of state interests but has primarily discouraged the pooling of sovereignty out of fear that an outside power will encroach

⁹⁸ Bohr, "Regionalism in Central Asia," 499–500.

upon their policy-making.”⁹⁹ The preservation of the current political elites and the continuity of their political strategies can be considered a major impediment to regionalism in Central Asia,¹⁰⁰ and it is also in this sense that the Soviet legacy can be seen as a limiting factor. The transcontinental links and general integration across Eurasia might be beneficial to the CARs in terms of trade and economic opportunities; however, there remain many issues, ranging from security to energy and infrastructure, which warrant stronger regional cooperation inside Central Asia. Only a change of the current political conditions in Central Asia and the rise to power of a truly post-Soviet generation could help blow away the shadow of the past and prepare the ground for Central Asian regionalism.

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⁹⁹ Sally N. Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2012), 179.

¹⁰⁰ Allison, “Virtual Regionalism.”